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Book Review

Language in Jewish Society: Towards a New Understanding.

John Myhill. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. 2004. Pp.v + 239.

In his book, *Language in Jewish Society: Towards a New Understanding*, Myhill ambitiously analyzes the relationship between language, identity, and society over a period of 3,000 years of Jewish history. Addressing a general readership, Myhill rejects an insider's ideological approach, which focuses on the uniqueness of Jewish attitudes to language, in favor of a typological perspective, which explores the commonalities and differences between Jewish and non-Jewish sociolinguistic attitudes.

The overarching thesis of the book, argued at length in the introductory chapter, is that Jews have conceptualized their Jewish identity through race (defined as personal ancestry) and religious affiliation (defined as beliefs, traditions, and lifestyle), rather than spoken language. In eliminating everyday spoken language as a facet of personal and group identity, Myhill observes, the Jews are no different from other minority groups that lost their homeland, such as the Copts in Egypt, the Maronites in Lebanon, the Armenians, the Sikhs, and the Gypsies. To explain cases that disagree with his thesis - the incontrovertible role of Hebrew in shaping Israeli identity, for example - Myhill cites the influence of foreign (Western) ideas in Israel, which, in contrast to Jewish ideas, construct identity from the twin building blocks of citizenship/place of living and national language.

Myhill derives his claim that spoken Hebrew has not been essential in maintaining Jewish identity from the fact that Jews have historically been multilingual. After Hebrew ceased to be a spoken language (when exactly this happened is still a matter of scholarly debate), the Jews adopted a succession of languages for the purposes of everyday communication - Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, and most recently English - without adverse consequences to their self-definition as Jews. Therefore, Myhill argues, language (Hebrew) cannot be said to have played a role in preserving Jewish identity. This claim appears to challenge Fishman's (1999) position that language loss entails "drastic change in the content of ethnic identity and behavior" (p. 451). However, Myhill allows for the continuing association of Hebrew with Jewish identity through functions other than everyday spoken communication: as a sacred language of prayer, ritual, and study (similar to Latin for Catholics), and as a lingua franca for Jews speaking different languages.

Chapter 2 provides a succinct and well-referenced account of the history of Hebrew and its use. Hebrew was originally the language of the Canaanites. According to the biblical account, Abraham and his family adopted it when they migrated to Canaan. Myhill considers this to be the first of many instances of Jews adopting the everyday language of other peoples, although in this case, the original speakers disappeared and the language came to be associated with Jews. With the successive Babylonian, Greek, and Roman conquests in the Middle East, and the dispersion of the Jews from their homeland, Hebrew had died as a spoken language. However, over the centuries it continued to evolve as a written language, and as a vehicle for religious and secular expression. Unlike Latin, Hebrew was also the cornerstone of early literacy education for most (male) Jews, though only the intellectual elite in each community had an advanced knowledge of written Hebrew. In the Jewish Enlightenment movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, written Hebrew began to be used for primarily modern, secular purposes.

Towards the end of the 19th century it became associated with the Zionist movement, and was “reborn” as a national language at the beginning of the 20th century. Although the revitalization of Hebrew as a vernacular supporting both “high” and “low” language functions was a unique event in sociolinguistic history, Myhill speculates that such a revitalization may be replicated by other endangered or dying languages in the right confluence of circumstances. For example, it is now accepted that the revival of Hebrew owed much to the fact that it became the medium of instruction in the schools of the early Zionist agricultural settlements, even though it was not, at the time, the home language of the pupils or their teachers. Myhill therefore advocates early language learning as the key to the success in maintaining and reviving endangered languages.

In the latter part of chapter 2, the author turns his attention to the current status of the Hebrew language in the Diaspora. While he characterizes Hebrew language knowledge among American Jews as “abysmal” (p. 98), Myhill does not, like other writers on this topic (e.g., Shaked, 1993), take American Jews to task. Expectations of Hebrew language proficiency, he argues, are antithetical to traditional Jewish attitudes to language and identity. At the same time, Myhill admits, there is no reason for optimism, since the historical uses of Hebrew for ritual and prayer, for early literacy education, and as a lingua franca are declining among the majority of American Jews.

Chapter 3 discusses Jewish languages other than Hebrew in the chronological order of their adoption, among them Aramaic, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, and Yiddish. Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language, was the lingua franca of the Near East, and gave Hebrew its alphabet. It is still spoken in a few places in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq (a fact not widely known), and survives in a variety of Jewish texts. The Book of Daniel, some prayers, and large portions of the Talmud (the compendium of Jewish law) are in Aramaic, as are a number of homiletic (the literature of sermons) and poetic works as well as the Zohar (the 13th century key text of Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah). Myhill compares the status of written Aramaic today to that of Latin, a sacred language known only to the intellectual elite. What the other three Jewish languages, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish (also known as Ladino), and Yiddish, have in common is that they are variants of languages spoken by non-Jews - Arabic, Spanish, and German, respectively. They are considered distinctive from those languages by virtue of their incorporation of Hebrew and Aramaic loanwords in their lexicon and being written in Hebrew alphabet. Like Aramaic, each language produced a corpus of written works, for example, the influential 12th century philosophical writings of Moses Maimonides in Arabic, and the novels of Isaac Bashevis Singer in Yiddish. Myhill’s discussion of Judeo-Arabic, spoken by Jews in countries under Arab hegemony, is brief. He considers its status as a distinctive Jewish language somewhat tenuous, observing that its geographical varieties are further from each other than they are from the co-territorial non-Jewish variety. Myhill is similarly disinclined to regard Judeo-Spanish and Yiddish as Jewish languages, suggesting that scholarly interest in these languages stems from various political and cultural agendas, rather than their inherent linguistic distinctiveness. Be as it may, he nevertheless provides us with a thorough and instructive account (too lengthy to be summarized here) of the social and historical vicissitudes of Judeo-Spanish and Yiddish.

Chapter 4, the final chapter of the book, brings together several unrelated themes in Jewish sociolinguistics. The first section extends the main argument of the book that Jewish identity is predicated on race and religious affiliation (rather than on national homeland and

national language) to the geopolitical arena. In this section, Myhill offers an interpretation (unconvincing and far-fetched) of the Holocaust and the Israeli-Arab conflict as “the direct result” of the differences in ideologies of language and identity between Jews and the other two groups, Germans and Arabs (p. 163). Readers will find more valuable the discussion of language policy and language planning in Israel, which Myhill considers overall more socially fair than in other countries. Specifically, he lauds the official support for languages spoken at home and in school by non-Jewish communities (e.g., Arabic and Armenian). He also observes that in Israel, prescriptive rulings derive their authority from ancient texts, rather than from norms of usage among high-status speakers (as is the case in other countries). Readers unfamiliar with Israeli culture will also be interested in Myhill’s account of the nation’s ideological commitment to Hebrew, expressed through the expectation and massive government support, for linguistic assimilation by successive waves of new immigrants. It is difficult, however, to endorse the author’s sweeping statement that an (alleged) lack of the interest in contemporary spoken Hebrew among Israeli sociolinguists is due to the “historical Jewish tendency to be more interested in the study of ‘dead’ languages than living ones” (p. 209).

It is not hard to point out the faults of the book. It tends to be repetitive and programmatic, and the scholarly argumentation sometimes veers towards the anecdotal, speculative, and impressionistic. A disproportionate amount of material was relegated to the endnotes, and there are occasional copywriting lapses. Still, the book is informative, comprehensive, and up-to-date, and can be recommended as a reliable and erudite overview of the history of Jewish languages and their role in Jewish societies over the centuries.

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